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Functions of Fuzziness in Chinese English Commercial Advertisements from a Pragmatic Perspective

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Abstract

It has been proven that fuzziness will not result in difficulties in mutual understanding under usual conditions. Fuzziness has not been defined accurately since the last century. The possible states of things involving a vague proposition are intrinsically uncertain. The most striking feature of commercial advertisements is that it is for the sake of profitability and commercial purposes. Besides selling the products or services, commercial advertisements desire to achieve persuasive purposes, grab the attention and interest of members of a mass audience, and thus change their original thoughts and consumption behaviors. The study found that nearly every English commercial advertisement has implied fuzziness due to the nature of commercial advertisements. The study has collected some representative English commercial advertisements in China and explores the functions of fuzziness in Chinese English commercial advertisements. The findings of this study will present us with an awareness of the fuzziness embedded in commercial advertisements and thus enable consumers to form the right attitude and values toward commercial advertisements.

Keywords

Fuzziness; commercial advertisements; functions; a pragmatic perspective

Plato first explored pragmatic fuzziness more than two thousand years ago in Greece. The term “fuzziness” originates from philosophy. It is philosophers that begin to research fuzziness rather than linguists. Plato declares that language has its deficiencies. Fuzziness has become a heated issue in the field of applied linguistics. Fuzziness in advertising language can be categorized at the level of vocabulary and utterances. Fuzzy words can also be referred to as hedges (Chen, 2025). The study has collected nearly 200 English commercial advertisements in China and carefully examined, analyzed, and discussed the functions of fuzziness embedded in these advertisements from a pragmatic perspective, i.e., Verschueren’s adaptation theory.

1. Verschueren’s Adaptation Theory

Verschueren proposed the Adaptation Theory in 2000, which is illustrated in his masterpiece called Understanding Pragmatics. On the one hand, Verschueren regards pragmatics as a general functional perspective on all aspects of language. On the other hand, he implies the formation of a systematic linguistic Adaptation Theory. He believes that the participants of a conversation should make linguistic choices, whether consciously or unconsciously, to satisfy their mutual communicative needs for internal or external reasons in one language. Language use can be fully researched from four different but related angles, namely, contextual correlates of adaptability, dynamics of adaptability,

and salience of the adaptation process. The present study focuses on contextual correlates of adaptability. Contextual correlates of adaptability refer to the adaptable relations between linguistic choice and the context. Adaptation is achieved by the participants in communication when they are making linguistic choices. According to Verschueren (2002), three worlds are involved in the communicative context, i.e., the physical world, the social world, as well as the mental world. The physical world consists of temporal deixis and spatial deixis since time and place are considered to be the ingredients of the physical world. The social world includes the cultural background and social settings. The participants observe the social conventions to adapt to the social world. The mental world mainly concerns the emotional factors, such as both parties' desires or personalities. When it comes to the application of advertising language, the participants should take these three worlds into full consideration to realize each other's communicative goals of each other. Generally speaking, the advertisers will adapt to these three worlds of the potential consumers. Fuzziness as a language device will reflect and influence the potential consumers' personal needs and consumption choices. Consuming behaviors are very complex, which will be affected by multi-faceted factors. The adaptation of fuzziness in advertising to these three worlds will produce larger positive effects upon the potential consumers, esp. the adaptation to consumers' mental world, specifically speaking, the adaptation to their psychological and emotional situations. When concerning the adaptation to the mental world, the advertisers can employ the fuzziness in advertising language that may be easily accepted by the targeted consumers.

2. Concepts on the Cultural Dimensions of Fuzziness

There exist some cultural elements in fuzziness, and they are closely related. The investigation of the fuzziness of commercial advertising in Chinese markets in English will reveal some aspects of Chinese culture to some extent. Cultural differences are one of the elements deciding the success or failure of intercultural communication (Mendez, 2023). The theory of cultural dimensions proposed by Hofstede (2011) is of importance analyzing differences between cultures. Hofstede believes that there exist five cultural dimensions that can be used to describe and analyze cultural differences, i.e., individualism and collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity and femininity, as well as long-term and short-term orientation (Hofstede, 2011).

The dimension of individualism and collectivism measures whether a certain society generally focuses on individual benefits or social benefits. People in an individualism-inclined society tend to focus on themselves individually and their own families, while people in a collectivism-inclined society tend to focus on the relations of ethnic groups or the benefits of bigger community groups. Power distance refers to the degree of acceptance of people whose status is inferior to others concerning the partial distribution of power in a society or organization. The understanding of power differs from one nation to another, where differences exist. Westerners do not regard power as important, and they regard individual abilities as important, which belongs to the low power distance group people. On the contrary, most of the Asians think highly of the constraints of power, which belongs to high power distance group people. Uncertainty avoidance means that when a society encounters uncertain incidents and the threat of an unconventional environment, it avoids and controls this uncertainty through formal ways. The dimensions of masculinity and femininity include qualities such as competitiveness and assertiveness representing males and the qualities representing females, such as modesty and caring, as well as the definition between males' and females' functions. The dimension of long-term and short-term orientation means the degree of acceptance by the members in a certain culture towards the satisfaction of delaying material, emotional, and social needs. This dimension of culture emphasizes people's attitude towards time; in other words, whether people attach importance to the past or to the future.

3. Functions of Fuzziness in Chinese English Commercial Advertisements

Just as an old saying goes that "every coin has two sides", the functions of fuzziness in English advertising in Chinese markets also possess two sides: positive and negative functions. Proper use of fuzziness in English advertising can undoubtedly improve the efficiency of language expressions (Chen, 2025; Liu & Wang, 2025). On the contrary, the abuse of fuzziness can mislead consumers and enable them to make wrong decisions. The positive functions of fuzziness in English advertising can be reflected in the enhancement of credibility and objectivity, the improvement of advertising appropriateness, and the exhibition and publicity of Chinese culture (Sun & Wang, 2024).

3.1 Enhancing the Credibility and Objectivity

One of the aims of advertising is to ensure the consumer to buy and use commercial products and enable them to believe in the safety and quality of the products advertised. As a matter of fact, the safety and quality of products are

considered to be extremely important for Chinese people's lives, and the Chinese government has already stipulated relevant laws to protect consumers' legal rights and interests, especially for products for babies and younger kids such as napkins and milk. If the advertising consists of figures and numbers, the advertisers may employ hedges to modify the numbers because it is impossible to calculate the exact number. Thus, credibility can be enhanced by the employment of hedges as modifiers (Lin, 2021). Supposing that the advertisers are not certain about the information, hedges can also be used in the language expression. Furthermore, the information in advertising language should be authentic, and the most important factor of authenticity is objectivity. It will be believed and well accepted if the information about commercial products is offered by the authority. In this way, the attribution shields may be employed in the advertising to show that the information stated is reliable and true; e.g., according to IDC's report on China's market shares of third-party cloud management services in 2019, Digital China entered the list for the second year in a row and topped the list. (http://www.digitalchina.com/en/) It is a slogan of Digital China. Internet Data Center is abbreviated as IDC, and IDC's report is released by the Chinese Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, which is an important branch attached to the State Council. The Ministry of Industry and Information Technology is responsible for planning and supervising the industries' development. Regarding this point, it appears to be necessary for advertisers to employ attributive shields to enhance the objectivity of advertising language.

3.2 Improving Advertising Appropriateness

Fuzziness can soften the expressions so that they will not be too direct or unduly assertive. Advertisers can employ fuzziness in an appropriate way. Human beings cannot live without social interactions, and their behaviors as well as their languages are definitely restrained by social conventions. The appropriateness of advertising language is determined by many factors, including the linguistic structure and contextual variables. Advertisers have employed linguistic devices to adapt to contextual correlates and thus improve the appropriateness of the advertising language. Pragmatic fuzziness as a communicative strategy is effective in achieving this goal (Lee, 2024). Taking taboo as an instance, talking about taboo topics regarding taboo in public places is considered to be rude, impolite, and uncultivated due to traditional and cultural factors. Thus, pragmatic fuzziness can function as a remedy in this way. Let us review an HLA advertising slogan mentioned and discussed previously: HLA jeans, men's wardrobe. As a matter of fact, men's wardrobe cannot only include jeans; it should also include men's socks, underpants, or briefs. Such kind of goods are also sold in HLA. The advertisers do not mention these things mainly because of privacy. Therefore, this advertising slogan has expressed it in an appropriate way and has avoided embarrassment.

3.3 Exhibiting and Publicizing Chinese Culture

When advertisers employ fuzziness in the advertisements, Chinese traditional culture is also exhibited and publicized to the consumers. However, there are still some aspects needed to be promoted regarding Chinese traditional culture. One, Chinese culture respects nature, and Chinese people are eager to make good use of nature efficiently to serve social development. Tao Yuanming, a famous ancient Chinese poet who lived one thousand years ago, has written many idyllic poems to sing highly of the elegant and pure natural environment. Mr. Tao dreams of a group of people away from worldly affairs, young and old, who are content and joyful in their primordial life in a peach garden. Nongfu Spring's advertising slogan states, "*We do not produce water, we are porters of nature*." This advertising slogan fully respects nature and promises that the production process is adapted to natural principles.

Another example is Sinopec's "*Cleaner Energy, Better Life*." It belongs to Sinopec, China's largest state-owned company that produces petroleum and gas. Though the comparatives "cleaner" and "better" make the utterance fuzzy and make the utterance gain pragmatic fuzziness, this utterance promises that the company's production is unpolluting to the environment. In this way, people will have a healthy and high-quality life. Moreover, this utterance has obeyed one of Chinese traditional cultural values. The relationship between nature and human beings are mutually interacted; human beings should respect and love nature and avoid destroying the natural balance. Therefore, nature can serve human beings efficiently.

Another cultural aspect is food. It goes beyond saying that food is a kind of culture, especially because food is an important component in Chinese culture. There is a well-known Chinese idiom, "food is the stall of life." The regular greeting for the Chinese people when they meet each other is "Did you have your meals?" Westerners may feel puzzled when they hear such expressions, or they may misunderstand that the speaker intends to invite the hearer to dinner if they do not fully understand Chinese traditional culture.

The advertising slogan of Youchen, *Open taste buds, makes your life a little more taste*, skillfully employs metaphor to make a vivid comparison between the taste of the bread and the taste of life. This advertising slogan presupposes that food will influence people's lives. From the perspective of culture, this advertising slogan indicates that Chinese consumers consider food to be very important in their lives, and they hold that food has played a positive role in their life journey.

3.4 Enriching the Message of Ideas

This study has found that English advertising in Chinese markets is very economical in language expression. It employs shorter utterances to convey the information of the commercial products. The application of pragmatic fuzziness can meet the consumers' desires or expectations to a large extent, which can help to maintain all the possibilities of the message encoded in the idea, thus offering consumers more space to freely imagine in an ideal way (Zhang, 2022). Consumers gain more freedom to decode the possible message and enjoy the beauty and elegance of the advertising language. On the contrary, redundant advertising language will make consumers feel tedious and bored. Consumers seem to prefer concise advertising language. Thus, they can deduce much information based on their own understanding. The English idiom, "one man's meat is another man's poison", may be interpreted differently by consumers with different social backgrounds in their own ways. So the consumers may actively put their own ideas into the concise advertising language, and try to make the information encoded adapt to their own benefits.

3.5 Making Advertising More Polite

One of the important functions of advertising is to change the consumers' attitudes and convince them to enjoy the commercial products or services advertised (Arkhipova, 2026). Therefore, conveying the information directly does not seem to be very polite, and it is difficult to grab the consumers' interest (He, Chen, & Dong, 2023). This study has found that there are a number of descriptive adjectives in the advertising corpus that this study has built. Descriptive words such as good, beautiful, or efficient describe the quality of the commercial products and leave a lasting impression on the consumers. Most of the advertising slogans are expressed in a polite way and show a modest attitude towards the consumers, maybe because the advertisers regard the consumer as God. Hence, they must fully show their politeness and modesty to the consumers. Therefore, the consumers can have the sense of being respected and the sense of identity.

We should not ignore the negative functions of fuzziness in English advertising in Chinese markets. Examples of negative functions are exaggerated publicity and mendacious propaganda.

4. Negative Impact of Fuzziness in Chinese English Commercial Advertisements

4.1 Exaggerated Publicity

The study found that some advertising language employs "No.1", "best", or "most excellent" to reveal that their commercial products or services are superior to their competitors. An example is one of the advertising slogans of FAW (China FAW Group Corporation), *Better than Best.* This slogan indicates that the corporation will try its best to refine and improve its automobile quality, which surpasses its competitors. It has boasted about the effects of the company's cars. Although FAW is the first automobile company in China, how can it be sure it will be the best one in China's automobile industry? The competition in this industry is high, and every company is moving forward. Another is ERKE's advertising slogan: *To Be No.*1. From the stance of advertisers, can they really become No.1 in the industry of sports products? Obviously, no one can provide a certain answer. Some consumers may lose their trust in it if they find competitors who can offer the same commercial products with the same quality but at a lower price. Consumers may feel they are misled by the advertising language. Therefore, it may lead to bad business competition.

4.2 Mendacious Propaganda

Pragmatic fuzziness will protect the companies from bearing too many social responsibilities to some degree. For example, C'estbon purified water is considered a famous Chinese trademark and the most competitive brand in the market. (https://en.crc.com.cn/) As a matter of fact, Wahaha is the most competitive brand in the purified water

market in China in recent years. It is possible that the older generation does not know it, but the younger generation who focus on the market must know that this advertising slogan intends to make mendacious propaganda. The Chinese government has stipulated some laws to combat mendacious propaganda or illegal business activities in the Chinese market. It is known that March 15th has been designated as Consumer Rights Day in China, and consumers have the legal rights to protect themselves from being defrauded.

5. Conclusion

Although there exist some negative functions of fuzziness in English advertising in Chinese markets, its positive functions outweigh the negative ones to a large extent. On one hand, fuzziness in English advertising can provide a big space for consumers to gain freedom and confidence in their mental world and allow them to imagine their promising future. Everyone needs a space to relax and refresh themselves for a while; thus, they can have more energy to engage in their affairs. On the other hand, from the macro perspective, the employment of fuzziness in English advertising will grab the consumers' attention and stimulate their interest and motivation to buy and use the commercial products advertised. Although business competition in the same industry is inevitable, such competition seems to be necessary today. Business competition will definitely motivate companies to reform and innovate their policies and technologies; therefore, higher-quality and better products will appear in the market. Thus, consumers will enjoy better products or services, and their quality of life will be improved compared to before.

Since the positive functions of fuzziness in advertising outweigh negative ones, fuzziness is still significant both for further research in the field of applied linguistics and the progress of society.

This study filled the gap in the lack of empirical studies on fuzziness in commercial advertising language. Some previous studies were theoretical studies only in the field of fuzzy linguistics. There are empirical studies dealing with fuzziness in TV programs, newspapers, political speech, and academic writing. The empirical studies that focus on fuzziness in advertising appear to be lacking. Thus, this study enriches the empirical studies in the field of fuzzy linguistics, especially in the field of fuzziness in advertising language. Since the frequencies of occurrence of descriptive adjectives are the most dominant among fuzziness, advertisers could employ more appropriate descriptive adjectives in advertisements to grab the attention and interest of consumers. Since the frequencies of occurrence of fuzziness adapted to the mental world are the most dominant, advertisers could study the marketing strategies and consumers' psychology systematically for a bigger profit. As for the consumers, they could make some mental interactions and thus make final decisions.

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